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The wine wars

It wasn't long after they arrived in the region we know today as Greater Cincinnati that settlers discovered that its rolling hills, climate and soil were good for growing grapes.

In time vineyards became familiar sights, and the region acquired a national reputation for the quality of the wine it produced.

(One of Cincinnati's leading citizens, Nicholas Longworth, had much to do with that. He established vineyards across the city and, in 1830, the history books say, bought up much of what we know today as Eden Park and Mount Adams - he called it the Garden of Eden - and planted Catawba grapes. From them he produced a sparkling wine that was good enough to inspire poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to write a tribute asserting that "the richest and best is the wine of the West that grows by the beautiful river...")

A blight that struck in the 1850s, however, destroyed the region's wine industry. Vineyards in upstate New

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York and later California came into vogue, and local farmers discovered they could more profitably use their land for development, tobacco or other crops.

Today, wine-making is making a comeback. Small wineries have been launched throughout Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. Kentucky alone has 32 licensed wineries and this year expects a 25 percent increase in vineyard acreage, according to the Northern Kentucky Vintners & Grape Growers Association.

Some of this represents the work of farmers looking for an alternative to tobacco as a cash crop. Public and private economic development interests are also trying to help, hoping to see enough wineries open to create not just a boutique industry but also a bona fide tourist attraction.

As it happens, the wine industry has become a matter of legislative interest in both Columbus and Frankfort. Last year the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states must treat in-state and out-of-state wineries the same with regard to direct shipments to customers. Both Ohio and Kentucky, it appears, will have to amend their laws sooner or later.

In both states, however, the debate is focusing more on the competing desires of big-box retailers and politically-connected distributors than it is on the welfare of in-state vineyards or consumers.

In Ohio, Rep. Bill Seitz, a Republican from Green Township, found himself facing a packed hearing room when he offered testimony on a bill that would dismantle part of the state's archaic regulatory framework and eliminate at least one layer of its mandatory markups on wine. So far, it's unclear what direction the General Assembly will take.

In Kentucky, the Senate has passed and sent to the House a bill that would, among other things, open the door to direct shipments by out-of-state wineries to Kentucky residents. But the measure is still quite restrictive, and as it stands is drawing vehement opposition from Kentucky's small wineries because it would take away their right to deliver their product directly to stores or restaurants - something they've been able to do for the last decade.

According to the Northern Kentucky vintners group, the objection involves more than the hassle of trying to convince a distributor to handle a small volume. (Most Kentucky wineries, the association says, produce fewer than 2,500 cases a year.) The real problem, growers say, is that in order to get a bottle of wine into a retail store at a modest price they would have to be willing to sell it to a distributor at a steep discount. If they make the delivery themselves they can realize a better return and still get the product on the shelf at the target price.

The small growers have been able to convince a few lawmakers - among them Sen. Katie Stine, the Fort Thomas Republican - to push for continuing to allow direct shipments by small wineries to retailers and restaurants. But so far the big players seem to be carrying the day.

That's just wrong. Small wineries should be free to ship their product themselves, and price it as they see fit. And customers should be able to buy from them as well, either on location or via a catalog or the

Internet. It's not the business of government to artificially inflate the price of consumer goods.

Publication date: 03-02-2006



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